DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 469 RC 018 388

AUTHOR Ledebur, Gary W.; Lawer, Jo Ann R.
TITLE Teen Pregnancy: Pennsylvania's Challenge to Rural Schools.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Symposium of the American Council on Rural Education and the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Tucson, AZ, March 18-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ancillary School Services; Dropout Prevention; *Early Parenthood; High Schools; Parenthood Education; *Pregnant Students; Program Evaluation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; State Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

In 1984 the Pennsylvania Department of Education notified school districts that they could not deny pregnant or parenting students an education; could not put them on homebound instruction in the absence of medical conditions; and could not place them involuntarily in segregated alternative programs. The state supplied additional funds to start comprehensive programs providing personal, academic, and career counseling; parenting education; health and nutrition education; health care monitoring; child care services; and specialized transportation. Funding from the Job Training Partnership Act was used to supplement services provided by schools. The State Department of Health expanded prenatal care services at public clinics. In rural areas, problems have included funding difficulties due to population sparsity and transportation problems. During its first 4 years, the program served over 10,000 teen parents in over 100 of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts. Although most school district programs are in urban areas, rural areas have been served by area educational agencies. Two program successes are a student retention rate of over 90% and a reduction in the incidence of low birth-weight babies. Program limitations are a low participation by males (about 5%), lack of quality child care, and no attempt to address primary prevention. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Gary W. Ledebur
Jo Ann R. Lawer
Pennsylvania Department of Education
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

ED338469

Teen Pregnancy, Pennsylvania's Challenge to Rural Schools

Teen pregnancy is a problem tearing at the social fabric of our country. In Pennsylvania it is a problem that reaches into all communities and neighborhoods. It is not only a problem in our big cities such as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, but a problem in the rural areas of our nation and state. Teen pregnancy is a problem in Punxsutawney, Berwick, Turkeyfoot and numerous other rural areas in Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, last year, over 13,000 high school students became pregnant. Of this number, over 7,000 had babies and 6,000 had abortions. All too often this pregnancy starts a cycle of poverty that is carried through to future generations. Teen mothers are at significantly greater risk of dropping out of school (national studies indicate that over 50 percent will dropout) and life-long governmental dependency. Their babies are at risk for being of low birth weight, suffering serious health problems, experiencing learning problems when they enter school, are more likely to be abused, and finally to become teen parents themselves.

Pennsylvania has the largest rural population of all of the 50 states. Pennsylvania is attempting to assist young parents to stay in school, graduate, and to assure that their babies are healthy and given the very best start they can have in life. The following is a brief description of how Pennsylvania is addressing the problem of rural teen pregnancy.

Background

Up until 1970, young women who became pregnant left school, had their babies, and went on with their lives. It was considered an unfortunate event but not something that created serious social or economic problems. Schools would encourage students to leave school when they became pregnant because it was considered to be in poor taste for them to stay in school in their condition.

With the liberalization of attitudes starting in the late 1960s, and the passage of civil rights laws such as Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, many groups advocated that students who were pregnant or who were parents should remain in school. Further efforts were made to assist these students to become effective parents and productive citizens.

Even with these enlightened attitudes and the weight of law, in Pennsylvania many schools, and particularly those in the rural areas, still encouraged students who were pregnant to leave. If they did not push them out, they often placed them on home-bound instruction whereby they received only several hours of academic programming a week. All too often the state Department of Education was a willing accomplice in this endeavor.

RC018888

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
JoAnn Lawer
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Legal Issues

In 1984, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania made a policy decision that it was in the interest of the state for teens who were pregnant or who were parents to stay in school, graduate, and be given help in the early raising of their children. To do this first required that the state inform local school districts, their superintendents, and particularly their high school principals, that it was against the law to discriminate against pregnant or parenting students. More specifically, the Pennsylvania Department of Education sent notice to schools that they were no longer to deny pregnant or parenting students an education; no longer to put them on home bound instruction unless there were extenuating medical circumstances; and no longer were they to unvoluntarily place them in segregated, watered-down alternative programs.

This action caused an outcry from many schools. Rural schools in particular felt that this was inappropriate and burdensome to them as well as to the teens. In the last five years, the Department of Education has seen a significant decrease in the requests for exceptions to compulsory attendance and in the use of home-bound instruction for pregnant and parenting students. Although the problem has not been solved, it appears that the rate of abuse has significantly declined.

Programmatic Development

Pennsylvania concluded that the legal course alone would not be sufficient. Therefore, it was determined that schools with a minimum number of students, usually 10 to 15, would be given additional funding to start appropriate programs to keep students in school. These additional services would be:

- Personal, academic and career counseling
- Parenting education
- Health and nutrition education
- Health care monitoring
- Child care services
- Specialized transportation

These comprehensive programs should be available to both male and female parents. Counseling is critical because students who are pregnant need additional support, help in determining how their lives should be structured, and to give them hope for the future. Health and nutrition education are important. All too often teens do not eat well and abuse drugs or alcohol which is a serious problem for a developing baby. Health care monitoring is critical because many teens, particularly in the rural areas, do not receive adequate or regular health care. They need to be told how to access health care and encouraged to cooperate with physicians. Finally, parenting education is essential. Previously in rural areas there were large extended families where teens could learn parenting skills from grandparents and or other relatives. This is no longer the case. Pennsylvania found that many of the teens enrolled in the program had to be taught the basics of child rearing and appropriate developmental expectations for their children.

In surveying pregnant and parent teens it was learned that many of them dropped out of school because they did not have adequate child care. In fact, in one survey, this was listed as the most common reason. Schools were allowed

to use additional grant money from the state to start or expand child care either in the school building or within local communities. Also, they were given assistance in identifying additional funding streams for subsidized child care.

One serious problem affecting rural schools is the lack of transportation. Under Pennsylvania law babies are not allowed to ride on public school buses. Until this can be changed arrangements have to be made with county transportation organizations, local taxi companies, or other providers to assist teens to come to school and to bring their babies to child care. This is an ongoing problem and is a serious problem threatening the quality of educational services to rural schools.

Coordination With Other Agencies

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania determined that schools alone could not address the problem of teen pregnancy and parenting. The Department of Labor and Industry, the department responsible for job training in the state, awarded grants to local Private Industry Councils (PICs) to start or expand programs for pregnant and parenting teens. This funding, Job Training Partnership Act funds, was used to supplement the work done by the public schools. In theory the programs run by the schools would be funded through the Department of Education and services provided to teens who had dropped out of school would be provided by the Department of Labor and Industry through the Private Industry Councils. Since there was not enough money in the educational program, nor in the job training program, many teens, particularly in rural areas, did not get services. Due to the sparsity in rural areas, often no programs existed at all.

In addition to the Private Industry Council program, the Department of Health increased its funding to its state health clinics and other service providers through expanded prenatal care services. This was particularly helpful in reaching teens who were at or slightly above poverty level and needed health care. Nevertheless, the programs have not reached all teens due to transportation problems, lack of knowledge, and the ability of the services to reach into the least populated parts of the state. More aggresive outreach programs are planned.

Findings From the First Four Years

Teen parent programs are in over 100 of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts. Although most of the programs are in urban areas, rural areas have been served by intermediate units, which are area educational agencies. These units serve multiple school districts and are thus able to provide services to those schools that have only a few teen parents. The use of these units has been very helpful in providing services to teens who would not get them if they had to rely upon their local school district.

During the first four years of the initiative, over 10,000 teen parents have been served. The program's first goal, i.e., keeping students in school, has been met. Each year there has been a 90 percent plus retention rate. This is significant in view of the fact that national studies indicate over 50 percent of teens will drop out of school. With the exception of several of the

urban areas, the incidence of low birth-weight babies has been reduced. In the rural areas this has particularly been true. Thus second goal, i.e., having health babies, has been met. It is evident that the expanded services to teens through the schools or the intermediate unit system have helped them to stay in school and receive appropriate health care. Additional analysis and study is needed to note if teens' parenting skills are improved and whether they are more successful after they graduate.

Limitations of the Program

The programs have not been successful in identifying and serving males. Only five percent of the program participants are male. This is particularly a problem in the rural areas where the teen fathers are often older, unknown, or are not easily accessed by schools.

The second limitation is a general lack of quality child care. There is currently not enough subsidized child care in rural areas to meet the demand. This is further complicated by the lack of providers, the lack of trained workers, and the severe transportation and distance problems in rural areas.

Finally, the Pennsylvania program does not address primary prevention. Although secondary prevention is a goal of the initiative, it does not seek to prevent teens from becoming pregnant in the first place. This area is fraught with political problems. Consequently, state legislators and most public and local school boards have shied away from addressing it head on. Nevertheless, it is been found that when communities and schools start programs for teens who are already pregnant they are sensitized to the problem and are beginning discussions about prevention. This is a hopeful sign.

Lessons for Rural Schools

The first important lesson that Pennsylvania has learned from its teen parent program is that coordination of services and programs is essential in the rural areas. The sparsity problem, the lack of service providers, and the growing poverty in rural areas all place great stress on programs. Schools, county child welfare organizations, child care providers, county transportation providers, health organizations and job training programs all must work together to assure that there are adequate services for teen parents in rural areas. This ideally should result in county-wide planning as is being done in several Pennsylvania counties. County human service agencies have has been working closely with health providers and the public schools to develop county-wide plans that maximize local resources.

Another lesson is that local schools cannot solve the problem without the assistance of intermediate units. Because the intermediate units serve multiple school districts, there are sufficient numbers of teens to warrant comprehensive programs. Without these additional educational service providers, few teens in rural areas would receive services.

Conclusions

Teen pregnancy and parenting is a very real problem facing rural schools. If schools are to adequately address this problem, they must mobilize all area services. A small rural high school, by itself, cannot do much to help teens

stay in school, graduate, and lead productive lives. Nevertheless, with additional state resources and close cooperative arrangements with county services, schools can, and in fact are, assisting teenagers who are pregnant or parents to stay in school, graduate and to have meaningful lives. In the rural areas of Pennsylvania there are many dedicated professionals who are working hard to assure quality services for this population but they cannot do the job alone. Both the federal and state governments must provide additional resources and leadership. Quality comprehensive programs are working but need to be expanded. In rural areas coordination, cooperation and comprehensive programming are the keys to assuring a life of opportunity for teen parents and their babies.

1771